the past four hundred years are the greatest example of behavior modification in the history of civilization. We have had everything taken away from us, and yet we have all learned how to survive. That is why in the ballroom circuit it is so obvious that if you have captured the great white way of living, or looking, or dressing, or speaking, you is a marvel."

Unabashedly, *Paris Is Burning* shows us a world where illusion and signifying are valued precisely because they have the power to affirm and engender confidence and self-esteem. For those who are brave enough to participate in this highly dramatic milieu, for those brave enough to "walk a ball" and "snatch a trophy," the most coveted reward is to earn the adulation of their peers and the judges who will confer upon them the title of "legendary," which is the same as becoming a "star."

As one of the MCs in the film shouts at a group of ball walkers, "O-P-U-L-E-N-C-E! OPULENCE! You own everything! Everything is YOURS!" he could well be shouting at legions of white men and women, but the ball walkers listening to his fervid, insinuating exhortations are Black and Puerto Rican. And as they walk they believe they own everything for that moment; everything that was ever theirs, everything stolen from them, everything that they can imagine owning while the crowd cheers them on. And if the crowd and the judges are convinced of the walker's "realness," if the trained and the untrained eye cannot tell the difference, then the illusionist wins a trophy and recognition, but it's a small fame in an invisible and troubled world.

Competition in the ball world stretches across a diverse array of categories, which allows everyone to participate. Some of the categories for both Butch and Femme Queens include: Sportswear, Eveningwear, Schoolboy/Schoolgirl Realness, Executive Realness, and Military Realness; other categories include Bangee Boy and Bangee Girl Realness, and my favorite category, which is the one I would likely compete in: Butch Queen First Time in Drags at a Ball. What

these categories tell us is that in this world membership is open to everyone. As the MC says, "We all at one time or another have lusted to walk a ballroom floor."

In a country where "membership" and "privileges" translate into white, male heterosexuality, which is itself an overly interrogated and distracting pose and illusion, *Paris Is Burning* comes to the screen with a dressing room full of articulate butch/femme queens who collectively say, "I am," and are so, *so real.*

Transsexuals, drag queens, gays and sexual transgressives, gender benders, legendary children, up and coming legendary children, mothers and fathers, elders; surrogate families are constructed from this to replace the ones that may no longer exist as a resource, or that may be too dysfunctional to offer any sense of safety, support, or love. Houses of silk and gabardine are built. Houses of dream and fantasy. Houses that bear the names of their legendary founders or that bear the names of fashion designers such as Chanel or Saint Laurent parade and pose at the balls. Houses rise and fall. Legends come and go. To pose is to reach for power while simultaneously holding a *real* powerlessness at bay.

Television and magazines tell us that our standards of beauty must be those of white, supremacist, heterosexual culture, and if in doubt we should look to *sacred* Europe for guidance. Everyone is potentially at risk of aspiring to be like and look like the very thing that despises their existence. In an ironic twist on the idea that the disempowered aspire to look like those in power, it is curious to note the now popular occurrence among fashionable and monied white women of taking silicone injections in their lips in order to make them fuller, like Negroid lips. This surgically created effect is called the "Paris lip," though Black women have been giving this "natural beauty" for centuries without the aid of injections.

Maybe Paris, a bastion of standards of Western beauty, is beginning to burn in the torment of its own genetic dis-